

A year ago, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi told graduates at Miami Dade College: “You are the American dream.”

The message to this year’s graduates as they leave school to find jobs might be something more like: “Keep dreaming.” The national unemployment rate is 9 percent, nearly double what it was this time a year ago, but there will still be waves of students graduating in the coming weeks — students who will expect to hear some words of encouragement and inspiration in a climate that’s wanting of both.

What’s a commencement speaker to do?

“I think my approach will be to talk about the challenges we face with the economy and really with the world in general,” said Rep. John Boozman (D-Ark.), who will be delivering the address at Harding University, a Christian liberal arts college in Searcy, Ark. “I guess what I’ll be doing is really challenging them, that we are counting on them to be a big part of the solution.”

For the first time since 2004, the National Association of Colleges and Employers’ annual survey showed dips — and significant ones at that — in both internship and co-op hiring projections for this year.

“I think, without a doubt, there is additional stress on the minds of the graduates, some who found jobs, many who are still searching and waiting to hear back from potential employers,” said freshman Rep. Aaron Schock (R-Ill.), who is speaking May 16 at his alma mater, Bradley University.

Schock said that while his remarks will acknowledge the precariousness of the job market graduates are entering, he will largely “take the long view about their role in society.”

Iowa Rep. Bruce Braley, who’ll speak at Clarke College in Dubuque on May 9, said he’ll take a page from President Barack Obama and ask the graduates to serve the country in their first few years out of school.

“I’m not going to steal his theme directly,” said Braley, a Democrat who has spoken previously at the University of Iowa College of Law and at Hawkeye State University.

“Part of what I always talk about is the importance of mentoring and volunteering.” Braley said he traditionally works in three to five “life lessons, and I try to make them topical and timely.”

The one boilerplate story Braley tends to tell is that of his little brother, who was diagnosed with cancer as a sixth-grader. Braley, a young father at the time who had just started his career in law, essentially moved his new practice into the hospital room so he could tend to his brother.

“Watching those kids with no hair getting chemo was a life’s lesson about priorities I will never forget,” he said.

On his flight back to Washington from Idaho last Sunday, Democratic Rep. Walt Minnick was working on the first draft of the speech he'll deliver to the students at the University of Idaho.

Like Braley, Minnick said the virtue of giving back will be salient in his remarks, although he added that he'd deliver that message any year, regardless of the state of the economy.

Several members said they think graduates might be listening to commencement speakers a little more closely now than they did in the flush years.

"Probably the graduates and their parents will pay a little closer attention than they have sometimes in the past," Boozman said. "There are lots of concerns, there is a lot of fear in society right now concerning job prospects; parents are concerned about maintaining their jobs, too. I think the difference will be that they listen a little closer."

Added Schock: "When things are gravy and going well, people happen to take a more lackadaisical approach to life in general. It's times like this that people pull back and evaluate their strengths and also what's important to them in life."

Of course, each graduating class — and each graduate individually — reaches for the diploma with a different perspective on what the future holds and how bad the present moment is.

***Rep. John Campbell (R-Calif.) thinks his audience of graduate students at the Pepperdine School of Public Policy stands to fare better than most, provided that many of them seek government jobs. Therefore, he said, his message doesn't have to be as bridled as he presumes some of his congressional colleagues' messages will be. Campbell said he's curious to see how California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger will balance the messages of hope and realism that he gives to the departing seniors at USC, including Campbell's youngest son.***

Rep. Jim Clyburn (D-S.C.), the House majority whip, said that with Obama in the White House, he finally has the ultimate attestation to a commencement address meme that he's been delivering to African-American students for years. Clyburn will speak at five graduations this year, including two at historically black universities.

"Even when I was a high school history teacher," said Clyburn, "I used to tell students the reason they should keep their head screwed on right is, in this great country, you can be anything you want to be. Even when I was saying it, they didn't really believe it. But I suspect the election of Barack Obama gives that validity."

On May 15 at Louisiana State University, Sen. Mary Landrieu will address the Katrina class — the students who were freshmen when the hurricane struck the Gulf Coast. "Not to underestimate the economy," said Landrieu, "but that pales in comparison to what these young people and their families went through in just the college years. This is not a group to wring their hands about the future. They have a different outlook."

Moreover, Landrieu pointed out that for all the state's travails since the storm, Louisiana's unemployment rate is currently one of the lowest in the country.

"I feel maybe more upbeat about my opportunities than if I was giving a speech in Ohio or Michigan," said Landrieu.

No need to tell that to Ohio Rep. Bob Latta.

While other politicians might advocate a call to action, the Republican said he'll encourage his Northwest State Community College audience on May 16 to find jobs in Ohio — stat.

"I want people to find jobs as soon as they can," said Latta. "I don't want them leaving."

And what about Pelosi, who one year ago was telling Miami Dade grads, "You can go forth with faith in yourself, faith in our nation and faith in the future"?

This time, Pelosi will address the graduating class at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore on May 21.

"This year's graduates understand the challenges as they enter the job market," said Pelosi's communications director, Brendan Daly. "The speaker will emphasize to them, as she has to graduates in past years, that within every challenge there is also great opportunity and that they each have the power within themselves to succeed."